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SUBJECT: OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS FOR SAINT VINCENT'S OPPOSITION

REF: BRIDGETOWN 299

Classified By: DCM Mary Ellen T. Gilroy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The head of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) opposition party, Arnhim Eustace, has stepped up his criticism of Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves in the last three weeks. His most recent themes included Gonsalves' December pardon of a convicted drug dealer and Gonsalves' embrace of Hugo Chavez, who visited SVG in February. Both issues sparked fierce public exchanges between the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) and the ruling Unity Labour Party (ULP). A 6,000-strong protest march in late February demonstrated that this is not just an NDP fight, but that popular disaffection with the Gonsalves administration may be growing. End Summary.

Drugs and Thugs

¶2. (C) In December 2006, PM Gonsalves granted a formal pardon to convicted drug dealer Alex Lawrence based on "national security interests of St. Vincent and the Grenadines." According to Eustace, the pardon and its timing (during Christmas) were deceptive and irresponsible. In reaction, St. Vincent's newspapers have been filled with articles and opinion pieces, some of which have criticized the pardon as "immoral," "unprecedented," and "raising international credibility implications." The pardon was also the major impetus for a 6,000-strong opposition march through Kingstown in late February, during which protesters called for the prime minister's resignation and new elections. According to Eustace, the pardon is also evidence of Gonsalves' remaining ties to drug trafficking elements and their influence over the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (GOSVG). Ken Boyea, first cousin and former political confidant of Gonsalves, told EconOff that "in the back of all Vincentians' minds is the fact that Gonsalves went from a drug trafficker defense attorney to Prime Minister, practically overnight." According to both Boyea and Eustace, "Gonsalves' background casts serious doubt on the genuineness of Gonsalves' anti-narcotic efforts." (Note: According to Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) representatives at post, they enjoy a cooperative working-level relationship with the GOSVG's Drug Squad but also admit that the country's serious lack of resources may hinder the Drug Squad's ability to be fully effective. End note.)

Chavez and Gonsalves: Too Close for Comfort

¶3. (C) Another major point of contention for the opposition

party is the perceived growing influence of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez over St. Vincent. Opposition members criticized Gonsalves' apparent approval of Hugo Chavez's anti-U.S. rhetoric during his February visit to St. Vincent. The opposition was especially incensed by Chavez's indirect attacks on the NDP. During one rally, Chavez yelled, "However, not only in Washington. Those who want to keep us divided are here also in St. Vincent! Here, we have people who want us divided!" At the opposition march, EconOff witnessed at least four protesters carrying American flags, returning Chavez's verbal attacks with attacks of their own. One protester yelled, "Who does Chavez think he is; coming to our country and telling us what to be for or against. This is St. Vincent; we make our own decisions!" Eustace summed up his party's concerns: "As St. Vincent and the Grenadines gets closer to Venezuela, receives more gifts, we could find ourselves also embracing their ideologies."

Comment

14. (C) Gonsalves was easily re-elected as Prime Minister in December 2005 on a populist platform that painted him as the paternal guardian of the poor and disenfranchised. In recent weeks Opposition Leader Eustace appears to have focused on two issues, drugs and Chavez, that have resonated with Vincentians, and may put some pressure on Gonsalves. Although the public display of displeasure with the prime minister was exceptional, Gonsalves may succeed in shrugging off the opposition's recent attacks, especially if he continues his potentially lucrative relationship with Chavez, which has already yielded promises of cheap fuel and a new airport.

BioNote-----

15. (C) Following the NDP's crushing defeat in the 2005 elections--it retained three seats to the ULP's 12--rumors were rife about a change in the opposition party's leadership. To quash doubts about his control over the NDP, Arnhim Eustace decided to stand for re-election as party president during the NDP's December 2006 convention, even though he had two years remaining in his previous term. He won overwhelmingly. Nevertheless, Dr. Godwin Friday, an NDP member of parliament, said that supporters wanted a more "vigorous opposition." Eustace's new mandate has probably motivated the recent escalation in his criticism of PM Gonsalves, serving also to dispel Eustace's image as an introvert and boring. Ken Boyea, himself a former contender for PM, told EconOff that "although Eustace lacks charisma, he is bright, capable and honest," and added that he would "completely trust Eustace with the keys to the country."

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